

Review of: "Spirituality of Pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago: Existential Questions and the Meaning of Life"

Lars Mandelkow

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Dear Snežana Brumec.

I am grateful for the opportunity to read and comment on your text. I said yes because I am fascinated by people's attempts to deal with existential questions, pilgrimage among them. My own research is mostly about psychotherapy, existential questions, and professional ways to combine one with the other. So please read all my comments with this limited perspective in mind.

First, I find your research question intriguing, and your methodological approach meaningful. I wish you all the best for your further work with the article until it is published - and afterwards (as writing an article is a kind of academic pilgrimage that hardly ever ends, just as the Camino hardly ends in Santiago).

In the following, I will comment on the paper chronologically: positive and critical comments, general and specific comments, and comments of primary and secondary importance just as they come, without any visible structure. I hope you just choose whatever might seem helpful to you. Please do not evaluate the comments quantitatively: as usual, there are more critical than positive ones – this does NOT mirror the overall impression.

1. Abstract:

1. I like the flow of language and the structure of the abstract.
2. "Rites of passage" - see comment below
3. I do not understand the sentence, "This blending suggests that the world is as it is because it is as it should be."
You might want to rephrase it or give more context.
4. The last sentences about the results sound pretty strong and fact-like, as if the experience you describe was the same for any pilgrim. You might want to choose a softer way of putting it to increase credibility.

2. Rites of Passage

I know the concept of Van Gennep and his work on predominantly tribal societies, and I think that many Western/monotheistic rituals fit well into the "rites of passage" category. Whenever a person goes from one social state to another, as in marriage ("single to married") or "confirmation ("child to young adult"), etc., I do not see, however, how a pilgrimage should fit in here. Turner & Turner argue for similarities, pointing to the moment of "separation from their community". However, pilgrims do not necessarily change their social status. Especially on the Camino, I understand most pilgrims' motivation as a personal search for meaning and connection, quite different from pilgrimages like the Islamic Hajj.

Therefore, I wonder if you should use the term “rites of passage” at all. Perhaps “ritual of personal devotion” might be better? Moreover, if you want to use it, I recommend discussing it more deeply, including counter-arguments.

3. Existential Questions

1. Existential questions are a suitable starting point for your analysis. Giddens’ definition, using time, space, continuity, and identity, gives you a broad approach to pilgrims’ experiences.
2. However, I was surprised not to find a discussion of other definitions of “existential questions”—at least the classical categories of I. Yalom (Yalom, 1980) should be mentioned, and it should be argued why not to use them. P.E. Binder has recently added a fifth dimension to this categorisation, which I like (Binder, 2022).
3. Additionally, theories like “psychology of meaning in life” by T. Schnell might be interesting to discuss (Schnell, 2020).
4. Therefore, if you want to continue with Giddens as your only point of reference, you might want to argue for that more thoroughly.

4. The pilgrimage

I think this little paragraph is really interesting. You mention many different possible motivations and hint at secularisation theory. This, I think, deserves even more attention. For example, you might want to consider Charles Taylor (Taylor, 2002) or Hartmut Rosa's “Theory of Resonance” (Rosa, 2018; Zalec, 2021).

1. Present Study

The explicit presentation of research questions seems exactly right at this point in the text and helps the reader’s orientation.

However, I struggle a bit with the term “trigger” – it sounds like pilgrims suddenly, provoked by something that happens on the way, find themselves thinking about something existential. Would you not expect it to be the other way around? That people who have started engaging with existential questions decide to do the Camino to find answers? Perhaps you want to consider a different verbal phrase like “an experience that helps pilgrims come to terms with existential questions” or “gives room for”, etc.?

The expression “fundamental trust” appears for the first time in the second research question – you might want to introduce it before or leave it out.

As I mentioned before, the term “meaning of/in life” might need closer discussion in the introduction to make more sense in the research question – and I think you should use it!

1. Method

Content theory analysis makes a lot of sense in this context (not so sure if the quantitative part is necessary – you announce it, but then it takes little space, and it is hard to tell what a frequency really says if you don’t know the

importance of a word/sentence).

In the method section, I wonder.

- Why are the Slovenian authors not named while the others are?
- How the categories were shaped – it might be helpful for the reader to know more about your decisions, perhaps about categories you considered but decided against?
- If some of the categories are too little specific: “time” and “space” seem clear, and the codes are distinct, but joining “warmth and vibrations” together with “meaning of life” to form a category named “existence” seems very wide - and why is that different from “soul”? I don’t understand that.

1. Time, space, etc.

The material sounds interesting and invites discussion. I am sure there is much more to find. Comparisons between different ways of perceiving time, space, body, etc., are something you start doing here – I guess it could be much more differentiated and comparative.

When I read through the paragraphs now, they seem almost like random samples from a much richer material.

You do it much more in the paragraph “existence” (which also might be called “meaning-making”) – here, the reader gets a much livelier picture of the different approaches; you use rich quotes and touch upon different aspects.

However, why does the list begin with “time” while the table starts with “existence”?

1. Conclusion

These are some very interesting summaries. The “everything is as it should be” idea seems especially important to you. I wonder if this phrase deserves an extra heading and some more systematic explanation. If I get it right, the sentence encompasses different aspects: trust in the future, trust in resources, belief in some sort of creation, a feeling of one’s proper place in the world, etc.

The aspects of time, space, and body are not mentioned much in the conclusion. Why?

A paragraph I really miss in the end is one about limitations. I think a reflection on the study’s scope would be necessary. The same is true for a reference to the research questions – if you formulate them initially, you should answer them in the end. Moreover, perhaps come up with some more that are yet to be answered.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to read the text. It makes me curious and inspires me – both to go on a pilgrimage myself but also to think more about the implications of such a rite in the light of existential questions.

Best regards,

Lars Mandelkow

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